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AMERICAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION.

HISTORY.

INAUGURAL ADDRESS.

BY

JAMES FORD RHODES.
PRESIDENT.

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II.—INAUGURAL ADDRESS OF JAMES FORD RHODES, PRESIDENT OF
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HISTORY.

By JAMES FORD RHODES, President American Historical Association.

A miner from a far Western town describes Boston as "a city in whose streets respectability stalked about unchecked." Here was a high compliment. To be respectable is to be worthy of esteem, and I think if one were to set down seriously the qualities which entitle Boston to honor, not the least of them would be the high moral standard that prevails here among men. This is worthy of mention to members of an association which stands, above all, for honesty and truth. It is impossible to attend these meetings without gaining the impression that, however else we differ, we are at one in our endeavor to elicit the truth; that we are ready, by precept and example, to traverse the definition attributed to Napoleon, that history is lies agreed upon. I have thought, then, that no theme better suited to the company and the occasion could be chosen than simply "history."

It is an old subject, which has been discoursed about since Herodotus, and one would be vain indeed who flattered himself he could say aught new concerning the methods of writing it, when this subject has for so long a period engaged the minds of so many gifted men. Yet, to a sympathetic audience, to a people who love history, there is always the chance that a fresh treatment may present the commonplaces in some different combination, and augment for the moment an interest which is perennial.

Holding a brief for history as do I, your representative, let me at once concede that it is not the highest form of intellectual endeavor; let us at once agree that it were better that all the histories ever written were burned than for the world to lose Homer and Shakespeare. Yet, as it is generally true that an advocate rarely admits anything without qualification,

I should not be loyal to my client did I not urge that Shakespeare was historian as well as poet. We all prefer his Antony and Cleopatra and Julius Cæsar to the Lives in North's Plutarch which furnished him his materials. The history is in substance as true as Plutarch, the dramatic force greater, the language is better than that of Sir Thomas North, who himself did a remarkable piece of work when he gave his country a classic by Englishing a French version of the Stories of the Greek. It is true, as Macaulay wrote, the historical plays of Shakespeare have superseded history. When we think of Henry V it is of Prince Hal, the boon companion of Falstaff, who spent his youth in brawl and riot, and then became a sober and duty-loving king; and our idea of Richard III is a deceitful, dissembling, cruel wretch who knew no touch of pity, a bloody tyrant who knew no law of God or man.

The Achilles of Homer was a very living personage to Alexander. How happy he was, said the great general when he visited Troy, "in having while he lived so faithful a friend, and when he was dead so famous a poet to proclaim his actions." In our century, as more in consonance with society under the régime of contract, when force has largely given way to craft, we feel in greater sympathy with Ulysses. "The one person I would like to have met and talked with," Froude used to say, "was Ulysses. How interesting it would be to have his opinion on universal suffrage, and on a house of parliament where Thersites is listened to as patiently as the king of men."

We may also concede that in the realm of intellectual endeavor the mathematical and physical sciences should have the precedence of history. The present is more important than the past, and those sciences which contribute to our comfort place within the reach of the laborer and mechanic as common necessities what would have been the highest luxury to the Roman emperor or to the king of the Middle Ages, contribute to health and the preservation of life, and by the development of railroads make possible such a gathering as this. These sciences, we cheerfully admit, outrank our modest enterprise, which, in the words of Herodotus, is "to preserve from decay the remembrance of what men have done." It may be true, as a geologist once said in extolling his study

at the expense of the humanities, "Rocks do not lie, although men do," yet, on the other hand, the historic sense, which during our century has diffused itself widely, has invaded the domain of physical science. If you are unfortunate enough to be ill and consult a doctor he expatiates on the history of your disease. It was once my duty to attend the commencement exercises of a technical school, when one of the graduates had a thesis on bridges. He began by telling how they were built in Julius Caesar's time, and tracing at some length the development of the art during the period of the material prosperity of the Roman Empire, he had little time and space left to consider their construction at the present day. One of the most brilliant surgeons I ever knew—the originator of a number of important surgical methods, who, being a physician as well, was remarkable in his expedients in saving life when called in counsel in grave and apparently hopeless cases—desired to write a book embodying his discoveries and devices, but said that the feeling was strong within him that he must begin his work with an account of medicine in Egypt and trace its development down to our own time; as he was a busy man in his profession, he lacked the leisure to make the preliminary historical study and his book was never written. Men of affairs who, taking "the present time by the top," are looked upon as devoted to the physical and mechanical sciences, continually pay tribute to our art. President Garfield, on his deathbed, asked one of his most trusted Cabinet advisers, in words that become pathetic as one thinks of the opportunities destroyed by the assassin's bullet, "Shall I live in history?" A clever politician, who knew more of ward meetings, caucuses, and the machinery of conventions than he did of history books, and who was earnest for the renomination of President Arthur in 1884, said to me, in the way of clinching his argument, "That Administration will live in history." So it was, according to Amyot, in the olden time. "Whensoever," he wrote, "the right sage and virtuous Emperor of Rome, Alexander Severus, was to consult of any matter of grave importance, whether it concerned war or government, he always called such to counsel as were reported to be well skilled in histories."

Proper concessions being made to poetry and the physical sciences, our place in the field remains secure. All of us here

will accept fully these temperate conclusions of the committee of Seven of this association, namely, "Appreciation and sympathy for the present is best secured by a study of the past;" the study of history is a training in the handling of books; it is a training in citizenship, in judgment, in character. This committee have compassed their object and established their points. On their ground it is unnecessary to trench, and for me it would be presumptuous. My paper will take somewhat the form of a plea for general historians, and from their point of view will envisage the writing of history. On the first day of our meeting we should maintain a closed front against the advocates of other studies, and it shall be my purpose to steer clear of mooted questions. I shall not discuss the propositions whether history is the "handmaid of philosophy" or whether it is "philosophy teaching by examples," nor shall I enter upon the relations between history and political science, and I shall aim to avoid definitions. I shall not go into disputed matters unless by the nature of the case I touch upon them by indirection, believing what Huxley wrote in his prologue to *Some Controverted Questions*, that "controversy always tends to degenerate into quarreling, to swerve from the great issue of what is right and what is wrong to the very small question of who is right and who is wrong."

Was there ever so propitious a time for writing history as in the last forty years? There has been a general acquisition of the historic sense. The methods of teaching history have so improved that they may be called scientific. Even as the chemist and physicist, we talk of practice in the laboratory. Most biologists will accept Haeckel's designation of "the last forty years as the age of Darwin," for the theory of evolution is firmly established. The publication of the *Origin of Species* in 1859 converted it from a poet's dream and philosopher's speculation to a well-demonstrated scientific theory. Evolution, heredity, environment, have become household words, and their application to history has influenced everyone who has had to trace the development of a people, the growth of an institution, or the establishment of a cause. Other scientific theories and methods have affected physical science as potently, but no one has entered so vitally into the study of man. What hitherto the eye of genius alone could

perceive may become the common property of everyone who cares to read a dozen books. But with all of our advantages, do we write better history than was written before the year 1859, which we may call the line of demarcation between the old and the new? If the English, German, and American historians, I have little doubt that Thucydides and Tacitus would have a pretty large majority. If they were asked to name a third choice, it would undoubtedly lie between Herodotus and Gibbon. At the meeting of this association in Cleveland, when methods of historical teaching were under discussion, Herodotus and Thucydides, but no others, were mentioned as proper object lessons. What are the merits of Herodotus? Accuracy in details, as we understand it, was certainly not one of them. Neither does he sift critically his facts, but intimates that he will not make a positive decision in the case of conflicting testimony. "For myself," he wrote, "my duty is to report all that is said, but I am not obliged to believe it all alike—a remark which may be understood to apply to my whole history." He had none of the wholesome skepticism which we deem necessary in the weighing of historical evidence; on the contrary, he is frequently accused of credulity. Nevertheless, Percy Gardner calls his narrative nobler than that of Thucydides, and Mahaffy terms it an "incomparable history." "The truth is," wrote Macaulay in his diary, when he was 49 years old, "I admire no historians much except Herodotus, Thucydides, and Tacitus." Sir M. E. Grant Duff devoted his presidential address of 1895, before the Royal Historical Society, wholly to Herodotus, ending with the conclusion, "The fame of Herodotus, which has a little waned, will surely wax again." Whereupon the London Times devoted a leader to the subject. "We are concerned," it said, "to hear, on authority so eminent, that one of the most delightful writers of antiquity has a little waned of late in favor with the world. If this indeed be the case, so much the worse for the world. * * * When Homer and Dante and Shakespeare are neglected, then will Herodotus cease to be read."

There we have the secret of his hold upon the minds of men. "He knows how to tell a story," said Professor Hart, in the discussion previously referred to at Cleveland. He has "an

epic unity of plan," writes Professor Jebb. Herodotus has furnished delight to all generations, while Polybius, more accurate and painstaking, a learned historian and a practical statesman, gathers dust on the shelf or is read as a penance. Nevertheless it may be demonstrated from the historical literature of England of our century that literary style and great power of narration alone will not give a man a niche in the temple of history. Herodotus showed diligence and honesty, without which his other qualities would have failed to secure him the place he holds in the estimation of historical scholars.

From Herodotus we naturally turn to Thucydides, who in the beginning charms historical students by his impression of the seriousness and dignity of his business. "History," he writes, "will be found profitable by those who desire an exact knowledge of the past as a key to the future, which in all human probability will repeat or resemble the past. My history is an everlasting possession, not a prize composition which is heard and forgotten." Diligence, accuracy, love of truth, and impartiality are merits commonly ascribed to Thucydides, and the internal evidence of the history bears out fully the general opinion. But there is, in my judgment, a tendency in the comparative estimates to rate the Athenian too high for the possession of these qualities, for certainly some modern writers have possessed all of these merits in an eminent degree. When Jowett wrote in the preface to his translation, "Thucydides stands absolutely alone among the historians not only of Hellas, but of the world, in his impartiality and love of truth," he was unaware that a son of his own university was writing the history of a momentous period of his own country in a manner to impugn the correctness of that statement. When the Jowett Thucydides appeared Samuel R. Gardiner had published eight of his volumes, but he had not reached the great civil war, and his reputation, which has since grown with a cumulative force, was not fully established, but I have now no hesitation in saying that the internal evidence demonstrates that in impartiality and love of truth Gardiner is the peer of Thucydides. From the point of view of external evidence the case is even stronger for Gardiner; he submits to a harder test. That he has been able to treat so stormy, so controverted, and so well-known a period as England of the seventeenth century with hardly a question of his impartiality is

a wonderful tribute. In fact, in an excellent review of his work I have seen him criticised for being too impartial. On the other hand, Grote thinks that he has found Thucydides in error—in the long dialogue between the Athenian representatives and the Melians. "This dialogue," Grote writes, "can hardly represent what actually passed, except as to a few general points which the historian has followed out into deductions and illustrations, thus dramatizing the given situation in a powerful and characteristic manner." Those very words might characterize Shakespeare's account of the assassination of Julius Cæsar, his reproduction of the speeches of Brutus and Mark Antony. Compare the relation in Plutarch with the third act of the tragedy and see how, in his amplification of the story, Shakespeare has remained true to the essential facts of the time. Plutarch gives no account of the speeches of Brutus and Mark Antony, confining himself to an allusion to the one and a reference to the other, but Appian of Alexandria, in his history, has reported them. The speeches in Appian lack the force which they have in Shakespeare, nor do they seemingly fit into the situation as well.

I have adverted to this criticism of Grote, not that I love Thucydides less, but that I love Shakespeare more. For my part, the historian's candid acknowledgment in the beginning has convinced me of the essential, not the literal, truth of his accounts of speeches and dialogues. "As to the speeches," wrote the Athenian, "which were made either before or during the war, it was hard for me, and for others who reported them to me, to recollect the exact words. I have therefore put into the mouth of each speaker the sentiments proper to the occasion, expressed as I thought he would be likely to express them, while at the same time I endeavored, as nearly as I could, to give the general purport of what was actually said." That is the very essence of candor. But be the historian "as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, he shall not escape calumny." Mahaffy declares that, "although all modern historians quote Thucydides with more confidence than they would quote the gospels," the Athenian has exaggerated; he is one-sided, partial, misleading, dry, and surly. Other critics agree with Mahaffy that he has been unjust to Cleon and has screened Nicias from blame that was his due for defective generalship.

We approach Tacitus with respect. We rise from reading his *Annals*, his *History*, and *Germany* with reverence. We know that we have been in the society of a gentleman who had a high standard of morality and honor. We feel that our guide was a serious student, a solid thinker, and a man of the world; that he expressed his opinions and delivered his judgments with a remarkable freedom from prejudice. He draws us to him with sympathy. He sounds the same mournful note which we detect in Thucydides. Tacitus deplores the folly and dissoluteness of the rulers of his nation; he bewails the misfortunes of his country. The merits we ascribe to Thucydides—diligence, accuracy, love of truth, impartiality—are his. The desire to quote from Tacitus is irresistible. "The more I meditate," he writes, "on the events of ancient and modern times the more I am struck with the capricious uncertainty which mocks the calculations of men in all their transactions." Again, "Possibly there is in all things a kind of cycle, and there may be moral revolutions just as there are changes of seasons." "Commonplaces," sneer the scientific historian. True enough, but they might not have been commonplaces if Tacitus had not uttered them and his works had not been read and reread until they have become a common possession of historical students. From a thinker who deemed the time "out of joint," as Tacitus obviously did, and who, had he not possessed great strength of mind and character, might have lapsed into a gloomy pessimism, what noble words are these:

This I regard as history's highest function: To let no worthy action be uncommemorated, and to hold out the reprobation of posterity as a terror to evil words and deeds.

The modesty of the Roman is fascinating. "Much of what I have related," he says, "and shall have to relate may perhaps, I am aware, seem petty trifles to record. * * * My labors are circumscribed and unproductive of renown to the author." How agreeable to place in contrast with this the prophecy of his friend, the younger Pliny, in a letter to the historian:

I augur, nor does my augury deceive me, that your histories will be immortal; hence all the more do I desire to find a place in them.

To my mind, one of the most charming things in historical literature is the praise which one great historian bestows upon another. Gibbon speaks of "the discerning eye" and "mas-

terly pencil of Tacitus—the first of historians who applied the science of philosophy to the study of facts,” “whose writings will instruct the last generations of mankind.” He has produced an immortal work, “every sentence of which is pregnant with the deepest observations and most lively images.” I mention Gibbon, for it is more than a strong probability that in diligence, accuracy, and love of truth he is the equal of Tacitus. A common edition of the *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is that with notes by Dean Milman, Guizot, and Dr. Smith. Niebuhr, Villemain, and Sir James Mackintosh are each drawn upon for criticism. Did ever such a fierce light beat upon a history? With what keen relish do the annotators pounce upon mistakes or inaccuracies, and in that portion of the work which ends with the fall of the Western Empire how few do they find. Would Tacitus stand the supreme test better? There is, so far as I know, only one case in which we may compare his *Annals* with an original record. On bronze tablets found at Lyons in the sixteenth century is engraved the same speech made by the Emperor Claudius to the senate that Tacitus reports. “Tacitus and the tablets,” writes Professor Jebb, “disagree hopelessly in language and in nearly all the detail, but agree in the general line of argument.” Gibbon’s work has richly deserved its life of more than one hundred years, a period which I believe no other modern history has endured. Niebuhr, in a course of lectures at Bonn, in 1829, said that Gibbon’s “work will never be excelled.” At the Gibbon Centenary Commemoration in London, in 1894, many distinguished men, among whom the church had a distinct representation, gathered together to pay honor to him who, in the words of Frederic Harrison, had written “the most perfect book that English prose (outside its fiction) possesses.” Mommsen, prevented by age and work from being present, sent his tribute. “No one,” he said, “would in the future be able to read the history of the Roman Empire unless he read . . . Edward Gibbon.” The *Times*, in a leader devoted to the subject, apparently expressed the general voice:

Back to Gibbon is already, both here and among the scholars of Germany and France, the watchword of the younger historians.

I have now set forth certain general propositions which, with time for adducing the evidence in detail, might, I think, be established: That in the consensus of learned people Thucy-

dides and Tacitus stand at the head of historians, and that it is not alone their accuracy, love of truth, and impartiality which entitle them to this preeminence, since Gibbon and Gardiner among the moderns possess equally the same qualities. What is it, then, that makes these men supreme? In venturing a solution of this question, I confine myself necessarily to the English translations of the Greek and Latin authors. We have thus a common denominator of language, and need not take into account the unrivaled precision and terseness of the Greek and the force and clearness of the Latin. It seems to me that one special merit of Thucydides and Tacitus is their compressed narrative—that they have related so many events and put so much meaning in so few words. Our manner of writing history is really curious. The histories which cover long periods of time are brief; those which have to do with but a few years are long. The works of Thucydides and Tacitus are not like our compendiums of history, which merely touch on great affairs, since want of space precludes any elaboration. Tacitus treats of a comparatively short epoch, Thucydides of a much shorter one; both histories are brief. Thucydides and Macaulay are examples of extremes. The Athenian tells the story of twenty-four years in one volume; the Englishman takes nearly five volumes of equal size for his account of seventeen years. But it is safe to say that Thucydides tells us as much that is worth knowing as Macaulay. One is concise, the other is not. It is impossible to paraphrase the fine parts of Thucydides, but Macaulay lends himself readily to such an exercise. The thought of the Athenian is so close that he has got rid of all redundancies of expression; hence the effort to reproduce his ideas in other words fails. The account of the plague in Athens has been studied and imitated, and every imitation falls short of the original not only in vividness but in brevity. It is the triumph of art that in this and in other splendid portions we wish more had been told. As the French say, “the secret of wearying is to say all,” and this the Athenian thoroughly understood. Between our compendiums, which tell too little, and our long general histories, which tell too much, are Thucydides and Tacitus.

Again, it is a common opinion that our condensed histories lack life and movement. This is due in part to their being

written generally from a study of secondhand, not original, materials. Those of the Athenian and the Roman are mainly the original.

I do not think, however, that we may infer that we have a much greater mass of materials, and thereby excuse our modern prolixity. In written documents, of course, we exceed the ancients, for we have been flooded with these by the art of printing. Yet anyone who has investigated any period knows how the same facts are told over and over again in different ways by various writers; and if one can get beyond the mass of verbiage and down to the really significant original material, what a simplification of ideas there is, what a lightening of the load. I own that this process of reduction is painful, and thereby our work is made more difficult than that of the ancients. An historian will adapt himself naturally to the age in which he lives, and Thucydides made use of the matter that was at his hand. "Of the events of the war," he wrote, "I have not ventured to speak from any chance information, nor according to any notion of my own. I have described nothing but what I either saw myself or learned from others of whom I made the most careful and particular inquiry. The task was a laborious one, because eyewitnesses of the same occurrences gave different accounts of them, as they remembered or were interested in the actions of one side or the other." His materials, then, were what he saw and heard. His books and his manuscripts were living men. Our distinguished military historian, John C. Ropes, whose untimely death we deplore, might have written his history from the same sort of materials, for he was contemporary with our civil war and followed the daily events with intense interest. A brother of his was killed at Gettysburg, and he had many friends in the Army. He paid at least one memorable visit to Meade's headquarters in the field, and at the end of the war had a mass of memories and impressions of the great conflict. He never ceased his inquiries: he never lost a chance to get a particular account from those who took part in battles or campaigns, and before he began his *Story of the Civil War* he, too, could have said, "I made the most careful and particular inquiry" of generals and officers on both sides and of men in civil office privy to the great transactions. His knowledge drawn from living lips was marvelous, and his conversa-

tion, when he poured this knowledge forth, often took the form of a flowing narrative in an animated style. While there are not, so far as I remember, any direct references in his two volumes to these memories or to memoranda of conversations which he had with living actors after the close of the war drama, and while his main authority is the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, which no one appreciated better than he were unique historical materials, nevertheless this personal knowledge trained his judgment and gave color to his narrative.

It is pretty clear that Thucydides spent a large part of a life of about three score years and ten in gathering materials and writing his history. The mass of facts which he set down or stored away in his memory must have been enormous. He was a man of business, and had a home in Thrace as well as in Athens, traveling, probably, at fairly frequent intervals between the two places; but the main portion of the first forty years of his life was undoubtedly spent in Athens, where, during those glorious years of peace and the process of beautifying the city, he received the best education a man could get. To walk about the city and view the buildings and statues was both directly and insensibly a refining influence. As Thucydides himself, in the funeral oration of Pericles, said of the works which the Athenian saw around him, "the daily delight of them banishes gloom." There was the opportunity to talk with as good conversers as the world has ever known, and he undoubtedly saw much of the men who were making history. There was the great theater and the sublime poetry. In a word, the life of Thucydides was adapted to the gathering of a mass of historical materials of the best sort, and his daily walk, his reading, his intense thought gave him an intellectual grasp of the facts he has so ably handled. Of course he was a genius, and he wrote in an effective literary style, but seemingly his natural parts and acquired talents are directed to this: A digestion of his materials and a compression of his narrative without taking the vigor out of his story in a manner I believe to be without parallel. He devoted a life to writing a volume. His years after the peace was broken, his career as a general, his banishment and enforced residence in Thrace, his visit to the countries of the Peloponnesian allies with whom Athens was at war, all these gave him a signal opportunity to gather materials and to assimilate them in the

gathering. We may fancy him looking at an alleged fact on all sides and turning it over and over in his mind. We know that he must have meditated long on ideas, opinions, and events, and the result is a brief, pithy narrative. Tradition hath it that Demosthenes copied out this history eight times, or even learned it by heart. Chatham, urging the removal of the forces from Boston, had reason to refer to the history of Greece, and, that he might impress it upon the lords that he knew whereof he spoke, declared, "I have read Thucydides."

Of Tacitus likewise is conciseness a well-known merit. Living in an age of books and libraries, he drew more from the written word than did Thucydides; and his method of working, therefore, resembled more our own. These are common expressions of his: "It is related by most of the writers of those times;" I adopt the account "in which the authors are agreed;" this account "agrees with those of the other writers." Relating a case of recklessness of vice in Messalina, he acknowledges that it will appear fabulous, and asserts his truthfulness thus:

But I would not dress up my narrative with fictions to give it an air of marvel, rather than relate what has been stated to me or written by my seniors.

He also speaks of the authority of tradition, and tells what he remembers "to have heard from aged men." He will not paraphrase the eloquence of Seneca after he had his veins opened, because the very words of the philosopher had been published; but when, a little later, Flavius the tribune came to die, the historian gives this report of his defiance of Nero: "I hated you," the tribune said to the emperor; "nor had you a soldier more true to you while you deserved to be loved. I began to hate you from the time you showed yourself the impious murderer of your mother and your wife, a charioteer, a stage player, an incendiary." "I have given the very words," Tacitus adds, "because they were not, like those of Seneca, published, though the rough and vigorous sentiments of a soldier ought to be no less known." Everywhere we see in Tacitus, as in Thucydides, a dislike of superfluous detail, a closeness of thought, a compression of language. He was likewise a man of affairs, but his life work was his historical writings, which, had we all of them, would fill probably four moderate-sized octavo volumes.

To sum up, then, Thucydides and Tacitus are superior to the historians who have written in our century, because by long reflection and studious method they have better digested their materials and compressed their narrative. Unity in narration has been adhered to more rigidly. They stick closer to their subject. They are not allured into the fascinating bypaths of narration, which are so tempting to men who have accumulated a mass of facts, incidents, and opinions. One reason why Macaulay is so prolix is because he could not resist the temptation to treat events which had a picturesque side and which were suited to his literary style, so that, as John Morley says, "in many portions of his too elaborated history of William III he describes a large number of events about which, I think, no sensible man can in the least care either how they happened, or whether, indeed, they happened at all or not." If I am right in my supposition that Thucydides and Tacitus had a mass of materials, they showed reserve and discretion in throwing a large part of them away, as not being necessary or important to the posterity for which they were writing. This could only be the result of a careful comparison of their materials and of long meditation on their relative value. I suspect that they cared little whether a set daily task was accomplished or not; for if you propose to write only one large volume or four moderate-sized volumes in a lifetime, art is not long nor is life too short.

Another superiority of the classical historians, as I reckon, arose from the fact that they wrote what was practically contemporaneous history. Herodotus was born 484 B. C., and the most important and accurate part of his history is the account of the Persian invasion which took place four years later. The case of Thucydides is more remarkable. Born in 471 B. C., he relates the events which happened between 435 and 411, when he was between the ages of 36 and 60. Tacitus, born in 52 A. D., covered with his *Annals* and *History* the years between 14 and 97. "Herodotus and Thucydides belong to an age in which the historian draws from life and for life," writes Professor Jebb. It is manifestly easier to describe a life you know than one you must imagine, which is what you must do if you aim to relate events which took place before your own and your father's time. In many treatises which have been written demanding an extraordinary

equipment for the historian, it is generally insisted that he shall have a fine constructive imagination; for how can he recreate his historic period unless he live in it? In the same treatises it is asserted that contemporary history can not be written correctly, for impartiality in the treatment of events near at hand is impossible. Therefore the canon requires the quality of a great poet, and denies that there may be had the merit of a judge in a country where there are no great poets, but where candid judges abound. Does not the common rating of Thucydides and Tacitus refute the dictum that history within the memory of men living can not be written truthfully and fairly? Given then the judicial mind, how much easier to write it. The rare quality of a poet's imagination is no longer necessary, for your boyhood recollections, your youthful experiences, your successes and failures of manhood, the grandfather's tales, the parent's recollections, the conversation in society—all these put you in vital touch with the life you seek to describe. These not only give color and freshness to the vivifying of the facts you must find in the record, but they are in a way materials themselves, not strictly authentic, but of the kind that direct you in search and verification. Not only is no extraordinary ability required to write contemporary history, but the labor of the historian is lightened, and Dryasdust is no longer his sole guide. The funeral oration of Pericles is pretty nearly what was actually spoken, or else it is the substance of the speech written out in the historian's own words. Its intensity of feeling and the fitting of it so well into the situation indicate it to be a living contemporaneous document, and at the same time it has that universal application which we note in so many speeches of Shakespeare. A few years after our civil war a lawyer in a city of the middle West, who had been selected to deliver the Decoration Day oration, came to a friend of his in despair because he could write nothing but the commonplaces about those who have died for the Union and for the freedom of a race which had been uttered many times before, and he asked for advice. "Take the funeral oration of Pericles for a model," was the reply. "Use his words where they will fit, and dress up the rest to suit our day." The orator was surprised to find how much of the oration could be used bodily, and how much with adaptation was germane to his subject.

But slight alterations are necessary to make the opening sentence this:

Most of those who have spoken here have commended the lawgiver who added this oration to our other customs; it seemed to them a worthy thing that such an honor should be given to the dead who have fallen on the field of battle.

In many places you may let the speech run on with hardly a change.

In the face of death [these men] resolved to rely upon themselves alone. And when the moment came they were minded to resist and suffer rather than to fly and save their lives. They ran away from the word of dishonor, but on the battlefield their feet stood fast; and while for a moment they were in the hands of fortune, at the height, not of terror, but of glory, they passed away. Such was the end of these men; they were worthy of their country.

Consider for a moment, as the work of a contemporary, the book which continues the account of the Sicilian expedition and ends with the disaster at Syracuse. "In the describing and reporting whereof," Plutarch writes, "Thucydides hath gone beyond himself, both for variety and liveliness of narration as also in choice and excellent words." "There is no prose composition in the world," wrote Macaulay, "which I place so high as the seventh book of Thucydides. * * * I was delighted to find in Gray's letters, the other day, this query to Wharton: 'The retreat from Syracuse—is it or is it not the finest thing you ever read in your life?'" In the *Annals* of Tacitus we have an account of part of the reign of Emperor Nero which is intense in its interest as the picture of a state of society that would be incredible did we not know that our guide was a truthful man. One rises from a perusal of this with the trite expression, "Truth is stranger than fiction;" and one need only compare the account of Tacitus with the romance *Quo Vadis* to be convinced that true history is more interesting than a novel. One of the most vivid impressions I ever had came after reading the story of Nero and Agrippina in Tacitus, from a view immediately thereafter of the statue of Agrippina in the National Museum at Naples.

It will be worth our while now to sum up what I think may be established with sufficient time and care. Natural ability being presupposed, the qualities necessary for an historian are

diligence, accuracy, love of truth, impartiality, the thorough digestion of his materials by careful selection and long meditating, and the compression of his narrative into the smallest compass consistent with the life of his story. He must also have a power of expression suitable for his purpose. All these qualities, we have seen, were possessed by Thucydides and Tacitus, and we have seen, furthermore, that by bringing to bear these endowments and acquirements upon contemporary history their success has been greater than it would have been had they treated a more distant period. Applying these considerations to the writing of history in America, it would seem that all we have to gain in method, in order that when the genius appears he shall rival the great Greek and the great Roman, is thorough assimilation of materials and rigorous conciseness in relation. I admit that the two things we lack are difficult to get as our own. In the collection of materials, in criticism and detailed analysis, in the study of cause and effect, in applying the principle of growth, of evolution, we certainly surpass the ancients. But if we live in the age of Darwin we also live in an age of newspapers and magazines, when, as Lowell said, not only great events, but a vast "number of trivial incidents, are now recorded, and this dust of time gets in our eyes;" when distractions are manifold; when the desire to "see one's name in print" and make books takes possession of us all. When one has something like an original idea or a fresh combination of truisms, he obtains easily a hearing. The hearing once had, something of a success being made, the writer is urged by magazine editors and by publishers for more. The good side of this is apparent. It is certainly a wholesome indication that a demand exists for many serious books, but the evil is that one is pressed to publish his thoughts before he has them fully matured. The periods of fruitful meditation out of which emerged the works of Thucydides and Tacitus seem not to be a natural incident of our time. To change slightly the meaning of Lowell, "the bustle of our lives keeps breaking the thread of that attention which is the material of memory, till no one has patience to spin from it a continuous thread of thought." We have the defects of our qualities. Nevertheless, I am struck with the likeness between a common attribute of the Greeks and Matthew Arnold's characterization of the Ameri-

cans. Greek thought, it is said, goes straight to the mark, and penetrates like an arrow. The Americans, Arnold wrote, "think straight and see clear." Greek life was adapted to meditation. American quickness and habit of taking the short cut to the goal make us averse to the patient and elaborate method of the ancients. We have improved, however, in manner of expression. The Fourth of July spread-eagle oration, not uncommon even in New England in former days, would now be listened to hardly anywhere without merriment. In a Lowell Institute lecture in 1855 Lowell said:

In modern times the desire for startling expression is so strong that people hardly think a thought is good for anything unless it goes off with a *pop*, like a ginger-beer cork.

No one would thus characterize our present writing. Between reserve in expression and reserve in thought there must be interaction. We may hope, therefore, that the trend in the one will become the trend in the other and that we may look for as great historians in the future as in the past. The Thucydides or Tacitus of the future will write his history from the original materials, knowing that there only will he find the living spirit, but he will have the helps of the modern world. He will have at his hand monographs of students whom the professors of history in our colleges are teaching with diligence and wisdom, and he will accept these aids with thankfulness in his laborious search. He will have grasped the generalizations and methods of physical science, but he must know to the bottom his Thucydides and Tacitus. He will recognize in Homer and Shakespeare the great historians of human nature, and he will ever attempt, although feeling that failure is certain, to wrest from them their secret of narration, to acquire their art of portrayal of character. He must be a man of the world, but equally well a man of the Academy. If, like Thucydides and Tacitus, the American historian chooses the history of his own country as his field he may infuse his patriotism into his narrative. For he has a goodly heritage. He will speak of the broad acres and their products, the splendid industrial development due to the capacity and energy of the captains of industry; but he will like to dwell longer on the universities, and colleges, on the great numbers seeking a higher education, on the morality of the people, their purity of life, their domestic happiness.

He will never be weary of referring to Washington and Lincoln, feeling that a country with such exemplars is indeed one to awaken envy, and he will not forget the brave souls who followed where they led. I like to think of the Decoration Day orator, speaking thirty years ago, with his mind full of the civil war and our Revolution, giving utterance to these noble words of Pericles:

I would have you day by day fix your eyes upon the greatness of your country until you become filled with love of her; and when you are impressed by the spectacle of her glory, reflect that this empire has been acquired by men who knew their duty and had the courage to do it, who in the hour of conflict had the fear of dishonor always present to them, and who, if ever they failed in an enterprise, would not allow their virtues to be lost to their country, but freely gave their lives to her as the fairest offering which they could present at her feast. They received each one for himself a praise which grows not old, and the noblest of all sepulchers. For the whole earth is the sepulcher of illustrious men; not only are they commemorated by columns and inscriptions in their own country, but in foreign lands there dwells also an unwritten memorial of them, graven not on stone but in the hearts of men.



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